



Urša Komac

PhD, Assistant Professor of Architecture, Faculty of Arts and Design, University of Canberra ursa.komac@canberra.edu.au

Why architectural design and research are not more relevant in the real world?

Architecture, to be successful, has to be influential and relevant. It cannot thrive by itself, apart from the world. Resources are limited. Costs and benefits are not borne only by the client. The growing suburbia, based on standardised vulgarisation of styles of the past has become to be the most successful contemporary residential typology. Suburbia is not only prevalent, in its most vile form, in North America and, in a more amiable form, in Europe, but it's threatening to attract the aspirational middle class in the overpopulated, thriving emerging economies. The ongoing transfer of the office park, shopping mall and detached suburban house model is leading to construction of horrendously unliveable mega-non-cities like Jakarta or Kuala Lumpur. I believe architects should influence decision-makers on the search of alternatives to make cities walkable, cyclable, connected, and efficient. These alternatives must lie beyond the mixture of naïveté and kitsch of the so-called New Urbanism.

Keywords: Suburbia, Image Architecture, Public Space and City

Most buildings in the world are not designed by architects. For instance, in Australia architects are designing only 3% of the houses. Most of the houses in other countries are just endorsed (signed) by an architect, but actually drawn by someone else with minimal drafting skills.

Most of the writing produced by critics in architecture consists of:

- 1) a discussion of image architecture (see the leading architectural journals);
- 2) inextricable mumbo-jumbo which, in the most understandable bits, tells us how capitalism is an impediment to good architectural work and salvation may only come from the inextricable work of this or that neo-Marxist philosopher;
- 3) a combination of 1) and 2).

Image architecture¹ can be defined as the architecture for which its stated function (for instance showing art) differs from its true function (serve the glory of a private owner, a patron of the arts, a politician and always an architect). In image architecture everything revolves around aesthetics. Note that, according to our definition, architecture based on mostly aesthetical rather than mundane utilitarian principles may well not be "image architecture". For instance, Richard Leplastrier's own house in Lovett Bay near Sydney is both beautiful and unpractical for most people and it is only accessible by boat. The kitchen is outside and the bathroom is a short walk from the house and there's no glass and decks all around and they eat on the floor. But he may well prefer to live in a beautiful-at-all-cost dwelling so in this case there would be no contradiction between stated and true function.²

The definition of image architecture applies mostly to public buildings such as museums, libraries or cultural centres for which aesthetics trumps any other consideration. It also applies to certain "statement" private buildings. Note that a building can be labelled as image architecture irrespective of its aesthetical quality. The Sydney Opera House can be defined as image architecture because it does not perform well although it is both beautiful and successful. Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum is not a good museum. It is rather a quasi-abstract image building with many dead spaces and cul-de-sacs in-between. RCR's library in Barcelona is extremely good-looking but because of bad ventilation it is not a good place to read or borrow books. Adolf Loos³ applies: "Next day the master saddle-maker came again. [...] For a

¹ For an alternative, but related, definition see Foster, 2011, Chapter Image Building.

² "I said to Richard once, when the kids were young, 'Why don't you get a table that they can sit at and do their homework?'" says Lindsay Johnson. "He said, 'There's something about a table that has a sense of permanence I just don't like.'" (Turner, 2011, Hunters and Gatherers).

³ Loos, 1931, *Trotzdem*, for English translation see Sekler, 1957, p. 31.

long time he gazed at the drawings [of Professor's Studio] and his eyes were brighter and brighter. Finally he said: 'Professor, if I understood as little about riding, about horses, about leather and about workmanship as you do, then I would also have your imagination.'" The Trump, Petronas and other named towers around the world are mostly both ugly but still more of a show-off than anything else. CCTV (China Central Television) tower is 234 m high skyscraper in the Beijing CBD, designed by Rem Koolhaas and visionary Arup engineer Cecil Balmond. The building is overwhelming in its scale and it is out of context. It is not civic as its function is to promote the Communist party of China. Image buildings are very complex, and they need to surprise. Teams of engineers and architects led by a "star" must design them. That is, most architects who work in image architecture, endorse the designs of non-architects, teaching or writing about architecture, but critically are not involved in the development of most of the built environment.

I argue that the general contemporary irrelevance of architecture stems from the disconnection of the architectural profession with the needs of the real world. It has to be clear that I am not supporting a populist architecture, but rather I am promoting the spread of good architectural ideas to be used by the wide community. In doing so architects must learn to communicate better and avoid reflecting irrelevant ideological disputes copied-and-pasted from theorists even more aloof than them. An obvious and immediate problem is how can architects generate trust in the profession. After all previous generations of architects are responsible for occasionally beautiful, but generally unliveable, CIAM housing states and Voisin⁴ plans; abominations filled with extremely beautiful buildings like Brasilia; and abominations-full-stop like Canberra. Well, someone has to say it: architects need to learn to behave with a measure of modesty. Indeed, the basics of our trade are not so complicated so most people could live without architects. To become relevant we need to show how we can improve people's lives.

Allegedly, the most alarming problem of the recently build environment is the spread of the American suburb not only to other Western countries but, even more worryingly, to the developing world. Look at the devastation of space, at all the depressing deformities of nature and architecture of suburbia. This problem is universal even if it has some peculiar local characteristics. Robin Boyd in the Introduction for his book *The Australian Ugliness* already in the sixties writes on the mess that is man-made America. He reminds us of the devastating attack on American suburban culture that Editors of *Architectural Review* wrote in Introduction

⁴ Le Corbusier did like everyone to have cars, like Hitler, Thatcher and George W. Bush.

for a special number (Editors, 1950, p. 340): “The USA might conceivably go down in history as one of the greatest might-have-beens of all time. This could be an unsuccess story of a gigantic sort and, in that sense, pleasingly American, but in every other sense a tragedy, a major tragedy for civilization, unthinkable were it not that the symptoms are there, can be scrutinized, diagnosed – just how is suggested in this issue of the Review.” In the same issue the Editors of Architectural Review discovered that similar thing was happening at home in England: “/.../ a world of universal low-density mess is creeping over the once-lovely English landscape.”⁵ Probably the most surprising fact about suburbia, given how famous Boyd’s book is in Australia, is that a Google search of the term “American ugliness” does not reveal anything remotely similar. The Australian complacency and vulgarity that Boyd points out is so ubiquitous in America that nobody even notices. To a large extent it looks as if America is stuck in “Groundhog day” design loop that started some time during the late Reagan times.

It is not surprising that having grown up between wall-to-wall carpet and ceiling tiles, the most famous American architectural critics from the top universities advocate for the destruction of capitalism and relishes on citing post-Marxist French philosophers, Third World activists, Situationists, critical theorist of the queer and the like. Yes, America is an unsubtle, philistine, winner-takes-all society, but the truth is that suburbia cannot exist without zoning, federal Interstates, parkways and so on. No, car orientated development is not a product of the *laissez-faire*, it is a result of well-meaning government intervention. Imagine, if zoning rules were to be all of a sudden abolished, cafés and corner shops would inevitably start popping up and the most adventurous Americans would dare walking to them.

I believe that the development of the civilised city I envisage and describe later on in this paper can most likely happen in a stable, somehow boring political and social environment, in which the market is subject to clever regulation, differences in income are not outrageous but merit is rewarded, corruption is kept under control, public schools and hospitals are well-funded, little children learn to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’, and a lot of people take a clean, comfortable and somehow fast train to work or to visit Nana. And yes, these are your old social-democratic⁶ European ideals. Reform and evolution are a tad boring, but most of the time better than revolution. I

⁵ The biggest historical threat for the English landscape does not come anymore from man-eating sheep or Blake’s dark satanic mills, but from the well-meaning suburbia.

⁶ The triumph of social-democracy in Europe means that most of these ideals are subscribed by most parties in the political spectrum with different emphasis incentives and income redistribution.

don't see anything wrong with them.

The emergence of megacities in developing countries poses both a great challenge, but also an opportunity for architects and urban designers. A transfer of the office park, shopping mall and detached suburban house model will lead to both alienation and ecological catastrophe. There are alternatives, and they lie beyond the mixture of *naïveté* and kitsch of the so-called New Urbanism. They can be based on experiences that integrate the new into the old, an intellectually sound design approach that pays attention to the context and the needs of the city dwellers and users, and thus allows for a more sustainable form of development that is not only feasible, but also practical and more economical in the long run.

Urban development needs, as well as a few great ideas, many little ones. It is in more in the little ideas where I like to think should be focus of any design practice, while keeping an open eye for the great ideas in their research. There is particular interest in the multiplicity of use and functions of the public space, and how the public intersects with the private. It is important to combine the shifting views regarding the scale, global and local point at the same time, while designing and researching in architecture. Many unexplored notions of public space are interesting for architectural research while designing. Both *leave-me-alone spaces* and *spaces to-be together* are necessary. Sometimes, but only in the city, the same space can accomplish both. It is the quality of public spaces that makes the urban life.

The development of urban qualities brought by architecture to the city is paramount: the effect that particular pieces of architecture have in making the city.

Further than that, should then architecture "*touch the earth lightly*" or create permanent and definite markers of human presence in the world? Reducing this question to a design dichotomy is misleading. The validity of any design approach has to be based on the context and the needs of users. I believe the architect must be aware of the restrictions imposed by the context in a geographical, social and historical way. Technology needs to be used wisely, to better follow the principles stated above. To an extent, the same applies to aesthetics. That goes only "*to an extent*" as I believe the aesthetic side of architecture to be inextricably entangled with both the needs and the solution to those needs. Users are emotionally engaged, to a variety of degrees, through aesthetics. I agree with Loos that one of the purposes of architecture is to create spaces that should produce effects and arouse emotions. Which effects to produce and which emotions to arouse, and how to get there, remains the puzzle to be resolved in each specific project.

You don't have to be an architect to realise that this isn't the best of all possible worlds. But as architects we are more than the rest of the world responsible for the

devastation of space and for all the depressing deformities of the natural and artificial world. Urban population is rapidly growing, so the problem is bigger every day. We, architects, should contribute to stop this devastation. We must do much better. Not only space, also our time is limited.

In summary, most of the attention of analysis in architecture focuses on iconic buildings, successful architects and their architecture. This is still the main research focus. The problem is not the society as the society is given. It is up to the architects to use their knowledge to honestly serve the needs of the world in which we live.

References

Boyd, R. (1960). *The Australian Ugliness*. Melbourne, FW Cheshire.

Editors. (1950). Introduction. *Architectural Review*, 648, 339-343.

Foster, H. (2011). Image Building, *The Art-Architecture Complex*, London, Verso.

Loos, A. (1931), *Trotzdem*, 2nd ed., Innsbruck, (firstly published in 1903)

Sekler, E. (1957). Research and Criticism in Architecture, *Journal of Architectural Education*, 2, 31-32.

Turner, B. (2011, October 28). Hunters and Gatherers, *Financial Review*, 28. Retrieved from http://www.afr.com/p/hunters_and_gatherers_Gv8fY5L79SbkxDyzSXBILK